

**Sacred Treasures: Stonyhurst Heritage Centre**

# From the land of saints and scholars – an Irish story that binds two nations together

## 17th century Irish chalice held in Stonyhurst's Christian Heritage Centre

They used to say that if you scratch an English Catholic you would find an Irishman underneath.

A couple of generations later and these days the profile of the UK's six million Catholics is a perfect representation of the country's diversity – from Tamils to Filipinos, Poles to Italians, from Asians to Africans and from every part of the globe – truly universal, truly Catholic.

In Lancashire, the Sacred County, where the Christian Heritage Centre (CHC) is located, you can find the same wonderfully rich diversity and difference – but nor do you have to look very far to see evidence of its links to the 'island of saints and scholars'.

Stonyhurst College, in partnership with the Christian Heritage Centre, is guardian of that rich story and holds in trust more than 100,000 artefacts and publications – and is embarked on an ambitious project to make them more accessible to the UK's Catholic population, especially the 850,000 children in our Catholic schools.

The college is currently home to students from over 30 countries but, like the county in which it is situated, you keep stumbling across its British-Irish past and you quickly understand why the centre's Theodore House, which will be opened next summer, is the perfect location to promote mutual understanding of a troubled past and, for the future, reconciliation and the healing of history.

Stonyhurst has among its illustrious *alumni* three saints, 22 martyrs, seven archbishops and seven who received the Victoria Cross for their outstanding bravery in battle. But bravery wasn't confined to the British.

Among the Irish who studied here was Joseph Mary Plunkett, whose father, George Plunkett, a Papal Count, would go on to be a leading Republican. Joseph took part in the 1916 Easter uprising and was executed by the British, aged 28 at Kilmainham Gaol, seven hours after being allowed to marry his sweetheart Grace Gifford – a Catholic convert.

Plunkett's personal tragedy was memorialised in a popular song entitled *Grace*:

*"Oh Grace, just hold me in your arms and let this moment linger / They'll take me out at dawn and I will die / With all my love I place this wedding ring upon your finger / There won't be time to share our love for we must say goodbye."*

Grace's reception into the Catholic Church prompted Plunkett to write her this verse: *'Your burning heart now spreads its wings / In the wild beauty of your love.'*

Educated by the Jesuits in Dublin, before coming to Lancashire, Plunkett would have been subject to the same religious and spiritual influences that 30 years earlier had inspired another poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins SJ, but Plunkett was also deeply affected by the oppression of his countrymen.

Perhaps foreshadowing his own, and his nation's, suffering his mystical poem *I See His Blood Upon The Rose* has at its heart an insistence that Christ's own suffering will never be forgotten; that we need to see beyond our own narrow interests; and that God's presence, all about us in the world, can give us hope however bleak things may seem to be (see panel right).

As Plunkett faced the firing squad, and his own death, he reiterated his belief that beyond the suffering is the certainty of Christ's promise of eternal life. His last words were: "Father, I am very happy I am dying for the glory of God and the honour of Ireland."

Plunkett's intense Christian faith is captured in his remarkable poetry which, along with his love of literature, was developed in Stonyhurst's historic libraries – now restored and, in December, on the Feast of the Immaculate Conception, will be formally rededicated



The beautiful chalice engraved with the name of the Bishop of Tuam dates from 1642

### I See His Blood Upon The Rose

**I see his blood upon the rose  
And in the stars the glory of his eyes,  
His body gleams amid eternal snows,  
His tears fall from the skies.**

**I see his face in every flower;  
The thunder and the singing of the birds  
Are but his voice - and carved by his power  
Rocks are his written words.**

**All pathways by his feet are worn,  
His strong heart stirs the ever-beating sea,  
His crown of thorns is twined with every thorn,  
His cross is every tree.**

by the Bishop of Salford, John Arnold.

Last year, during the centenary commemoration of the 1916 Uprising – which involved 1,500 insurgents and cost 450 lives – Plunkett's poetry and his legacy were the theme of talks given by former Irish Ambassador, Dan Mulhall; leading Irish Senator Ronan Mullen; and Stonyhurst's celebrated archivist, David Knight. There was also a visit by the former Irish Taoiseach, John Bruton, who is a patron of the Christian Heritage Centre.

But the teenage Plunkett was by no means a unique Irish scholar: 70 years before Plunkett faced his executioners another young Irishman had arrived to study in Lancashire.



Thomas Francis Meagher was the son of an Irish Nationalist MP and, as a leader of the Young Irelanders, he had taken part in the 1848 Rebellion.

His story was set during the period of the Irish Famine – when one million Irish died and three million fled hunger and poverty to settle in America.

His stand against British indifference to widespread starvation, and to the heartless eviction of thousands of tenants from their homes, led to Meagher's capture and to a death-sentence – commuted to transportation to Tasmania.

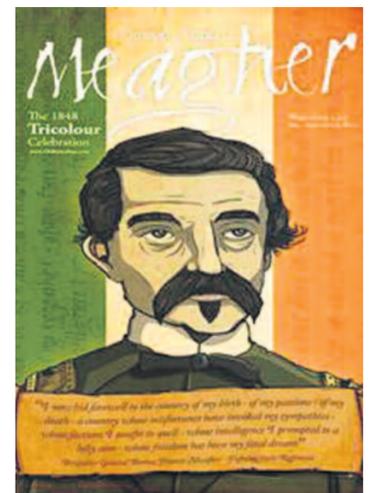
On arrival in the antipodes he jumped ship and, after making his way to New York, he raised the Irish Brigade, fighting in the Civil War for the Union –

becoming Brigadier General and, later, Acting Governor of Montana.

Meagher, like Plunkett, was part of a succession of young men influenced by a burning sense of the injustice experienced by the Catholic people of Ireland; and they felt duty bound to do something about it.

That oppression had begun with Oliver Cromwell's ruthless suppression of Catholicism in Ireland which led to the faithful sustaining their religious faith through centuries of persecution. Ironically, during England's Civil War, Cromwell had brought his army to fight the Royalists at the Battle of Preston (1648) and slept in full armour on a table (which can still be seen) in the Great Hall at Stonyhurst. He said he didn't want a bed for fear of assassination by Catholics.

When the following year, in 1649, Cromwell began his wars against the Irish and committed appalling atrocities, imposed penal laws, confiscated property, attempted to crush their religious faith, sold human beings into indentured labour in the colonies, and wiped out around 20 per cent of the



Memorial cards paying tribute to Meagher (top) and Joseph Plunkett

Catholic population, he had become a truly hated figure. Today we would call it ethnic cleansing and genocide.

Whatever you choose to call it, this combination of religious persecution and abhorrent social injustice created conditions in which resentment festered and violence was fomented – with bitter consequences, right down to our own times.

And within the Christian Heritage Centre Collections at Stonyhurst is a direct link with that tortured past.

The suffering in western counties of Ireland, particularly Mayo and Galway, was especially acute, leading to mass depopulation. Passed down from that unsettled period is a chalice engraved with the name of the Bishop of Tuam, in 1642 – and who came from the Mayo town of Ballinrobe.

That chalice, the cup of Christ's own blood, reminds us how Faith endured despite every attempt to eradicate it.

In today's more harmonious times it is important we should forgive but never forget how shocking brutality, failure to address grievances, attempts to suppress freedom of religion and belief, all gave rise to centuries of conflict, to appalling suffering, to emigration, to the death sentence imposed on Thomas Francis Meagher and to the execution of young men like Joseph Mary Plunkett.

Forget your story and you are condemned to repeat all the mistakes of former times.

• The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst is a free-standing charity. Building work is currently underway on Theodore House which will be used for study, retreat and Christian leadership formation. Please consider helping the project. Donations, however small, are gratefully received – as are bequests and endowments. Contact Anton' de Piro at: [anton@christianheritagecentre.com](mailto:anton@christianheritagecentre.com) or see [www.christianheritagecentre.com/www.facebook.com/ChristianHeritageCentre](http://www.christianheritagecentre.com/www.facebook.com/ChristianHeritageCentre).

## The Christian Heritage Centre

The Christian Heritage Centre at Stonyhurst creates access to unique Catholic collections – items which draw on this country's Christian story. This registered charity is currently creating accommodation for scholars, retreatants and those wishing to deepen their Christian Faith. Theodore House will be followed by a Visitors' Centre which will enable parishes, schools and the general public to have even greater access to these amazing collections.

To find out more go to [www.christianheritagecentre.com](http://www.christianheritagecentre.com) or contact [info@christianheritagecentre.com](mailto:info@christianheritagecentre.com)